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The Role of Counterfactual Imagination in Reconstructing History in Contemporary British Historical Novels Depicting World War Two

ABSTRACT

The article is aimed at analysing the role of counterfactual imagination in selected contemporary British historical novels which depict World War Two and, thus, attempt to reconstruct history. First, the importance of imagination in producing historical novels is discussed. Second, the role of and reasons for imagining are examined in view of counterfactuals. Then, counterfactual imagination that stems from creating fictional and alternative versions of events is illustrated with examples from contemporary British historical novels. The selected novels include Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, Lissa Evans's *Their Finest Hour and a Half* as well as John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. It is analysed how counterfactual imagination is depicted in the novels and what bearing it may have on this genre as well as the perception of historical events which are reconstructed by dint of fictionalisation.

KEYWORDS

Counterfactual Imagination, Historical Novel, World War Two

Imagining History

It is imagination that may be considered crucial to the process of writing a novel, be it a fantasy, science-fiction, crime or historical one. Imagination is exercised both by writers to produce works of literature and by readers in order to engross in them and grasp their underlying meaning. As Schofield

states, "it was Aristotle who gave the first extended analytical description of imagining as a distinct faculty of the soul, and who first drew attention [...] to the difficulty of achieving an adequate philosophical understanding of imagination."¹ Since then imagination seems to have played a significant role in both creating and reading works of fiction.

It should be noted that the concept of imagination has accompanied the historical novel since the advent of this genre. According to James Kerr, "Scott's historiography is an untidy amalgam of conflicting notions about the relationship between fiction and historical reality and about the power of the imagination to reshape the course of history by means of story."² The genre of historical novel dates back to the early nineteenth century and Walter Scott's *Waverley*. From that moment on, the legacy of historical fiction as a compilation of factual material and imaginative writing achieved by means of literary tropes and devices has been widely discussed. R. G. Collingwood asserts that "[e]very present has a past of its own, and any imaginative reconstruction of the past aims at reconstructing the past of this present, in which the act of imagination is going on, as here and now perceived."³ Although past events cannot be completely reconstructed, some of their inherent properties may be reconstructed in reference to current circumstances. In other words, the past can be imagined and recreated by dint of historical novels. Hayden White examines the differences and similarities between historians' and novelists' tasks, stating that "[t]he real would consist of everything that can be truthfully said about its actuality," whereas a historical novel would encompass "everything that can be truthfully said about what it could possibly be."⁴ In this respect, as long as the events described in a work of fiction are at least probable in the given circumstances and time period, all possible events meeting this criterion may be included in a narrative relating to the past.

Imagination regarded as a tool for comprehending might be deemed indispensable while dealing with historical fiction since it requires the reader to imagine a storyworld set in the past. As Jerome de Groot claims, historical novelists display a tendency to "concentrate on the gaps between known factual history and that which is lived to a variety of purposes."⁵ So as to fill these gaps, readers are expected to stretch their imagination.

¹ M. Schofield, *Aristotle on the Imagination*, [in:] *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima*, ed. A. Oksenberg Rorty and M. C. Nussbaum, Oxford 1995, p. 250.

² J. Kerr, *Fiction Against History: Scott as Storyteller*, Cambridge 1989, p. 15.

³ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford 1993, p. 247.

⁴ H. White, *Introduction: Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality*, "Re-thinking History" 2005, No. 2/3 (9), p. 147.

⁵ J. de Groot, *The Historical Novel*, London–New York 2010, p. 3.

Counterfactual Imagination

As far as imagination involved in the process of reading historical novels is concerned, the article focuses on fiction-oriented imagination. In order to distinguish it from other varieties of imagining and approach the topic of imagination applied in works of fiction, Kathleen Stock adopted the concept of *f-imagining*⁶ which functions with reference to fictitious content, fictional representations and fictive invention. *F-imagining* is further defined as “propositional in content”⁷ and “potentially conjunctive”⁸ as well as intentional and goal-directed.⁹ The first feature relates to imagining whose content either fits, or fails to fit, what is true;¹⁰ on top of that, it is neither accurate nor inaccurate.¹¹ Being true refers to rationality and plausibility of actions; whereas being untrue relates to irrationality and implausibility, when unrealistic and unfaithful representations are opted for. If fiction-related imagining proves to be at odds with truth and accuracy, it may result in counterfactual imagination, which invites the reader to engage in envisaging an alternative scenario. It is thus imagining that is aimed at creating a counterfactual version of events.

Regarding the second feature, potential conjunction denotes the possibility of conjunctive situations co-occurring with respect to the same scenario.¹² Conjoining may also refer to juxtaposing factual data with fictional content. It should be noted that imagination is only potentially rather than necessarily conjunctive or consecutive.¹³ Accordingly, fiction may take advantage of imagination in forms of flashbacks, flashforwards or frame narratives. Moreover, an element that seems to be true at one point in a novel might prove to be fictitious and intended to deceive readers or come as a startling revelation later in the course of the novel. De Groot asserts that historical novels deal with “a conjunction of the fictional uncanny and the factually authentic.”¹⁴ In this respect, historical events are fictionalised in such a way that they seem to depict probable stories and recreate historical past, but in a rather unsettling manner. In view of an uncanny resemblance of fiction to the actual world, readers may both identify with the characters and distance themselves from the represented world.

⁶ K. Stock, *Only Imagine: Fiction, Interpretation, and Imagination*, Oxford 2017, pp. 10–20.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 26.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 27.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 190.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 24.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 142.

¹² Ibidem, p. 27.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 27, 190.

¹⁴ J. de Groot, op. cit., p. 5.

With regard to intentionality, as Ruth Byrne asserts, people tend to imagine alternatives to their actions rather than their failures to act,¹⁵ especially with the aim of rectifying their faults and redressing their wrongs. Roese and Morrison also underline an “affective function” of counterfactuals as well as their “upward” nature.¹⁶ Correspondingly, people tend to produce unrealistic versions of events so as to improve their existence, enhance their well-being and be seen as more righteous. Counterfactuals are thus aimed at undoing mistakes but within the realms of possibility and in relation to causal thought.

It should be borne in mind that counterfactuals are built around immutable elements and “anchored possibilities”¹⁷ so that historical events form the bed-rock of counterfactual scenarios, whereas the imagined content is achieved in a creative process of composing works of fiction. Further to goals of counterfactual imagination, it can, in Byrne’s view, “amplify emotions, and the emotions people experience may be affected by the sorts of counterfactual alternatives they create.”¹⁸ In this respect, the creators or authors of counterfactuals display a tendency to become involved in the figments of their imagination which, in turn, may impact their current and future lives.

Contemporary WW2 Historical Novels

Characters’ fertile imagination appears to play an important role in contemporary British historical novels which are set during World War Two. Protagonists are inclined to create alternative versions of events or fabricate facts, especially in a written form. They also tend to escape from the grim reality into an imagined world. This creative approach to historical events encourages readers’ imaginative engagement while interpreting historical novels as well. Although de Groot claims that “[e]ssentially all historical fiction is to some degree What if? writing,”¹⁹ for the purpose of this article, the following three British historical novels were selected: Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, Lissa Evans’s *Their Finest Hour and a Half* as well as John Boyne’s *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas*. The novels tackle the issue of a fictional variety of imagining in the form of counterfactual imagination exercised with the aim of presenting alternative versions of history.

¹⁵ R. Byrne, *The Rational Imagination: How People Create Alternatives to Reality*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) 2005, p. 42.

¹⁶ N. J. Roese, M. Morrison, *The Psychology of Counterfactual Thinking*, [in:] “Historical Social Research” 2009, No. 2 (34), [online] <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20762352> [accessed: 1.06.2019], pp. 20–21.

¹⁷ R. Byrne, op. cit., p. 203.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 214.

¹⁹ J. de Groot, op. cit., p. 173.

Atonement

McEwan's *Atonement* may serve as an example of a counterfactual scenario that occurs as a figment of child's overactive imagination. It depicts an upper-class family shortly before the outbreak of World War Two. Thirteen-year-old Briony writes her first literary text—a drama *The Trials of Arabella*, tries to use more grown-up language adopted from her adolescent cousin, spies on her older sister Cecilia and platonically loves the cleaning lady's son, Robbie, who is in love with Cecilia. This complex combination of adolescent fantasies, class stratification, family problems and secret desires is intensified by political uncertainty.

An impending crisis is anticipated by means of a flashforward: "Within the half hour Briony would commit her crime."²⁰ The "crime" refers to her falsely accusing Robbie of raping her cousin Lola and thus ruining his life. Yet his future prospects would be wrecked by the war anyway. There appear to be two parallel worlds, that is fading reminiscences of the past and the current action of writing. Observing Cecilia and Robbie at the fountain and then interrupting their sexual encounter in the library may represent the beginning of Briony's literary career because, according to Bradley, it is the first time she realises that other people exist.²¹ In comparison to *The Trials of Arabella*, the heroine makes a decision to incorporate real people into her future narrative. However, she takes advantage of others' possible experiences rather than trying to comprehend their behaviour and choices.

There seem to be two timelines superimposed on each other and linked by Briony's demonstrating an overactive imagination. As Perez Rodriguez states, the novel portrays a "troubled relationship between the present of the narrative time and the past that haunts the characters."²² At the end of the novel, despite her seventy-seven years, the protagonist still lives in the realm of imagination, failing to make a distinction between the fictional and the real. She meddles in other people's affairs and affects their lives because of romantic fiction she grew up on. She attempts to atone for false accusations she made on the basis of her fevered imagination and inclination to create fiction. Perez Rodriguez points out that Briony's "feasible atonement lies in the physiological impossibility to remember, or conversely, in the ability to forget completely as

²⁰ I. McEwan, *Atonement*, New York–London 2001, p. 89.

²¹ A. Bradley, *The New Atheist Novel: Literature, Religion, and Terror in Amis and McEwan*, "The Yearbook of English Studies" 2009, No. 1/2 (39), p. 25.

²² E. M. Perez Rodriguez, *How the Second World War is Depicted by British Novelists Since 1990*, New York–Ontario–Ceredigion 2012, p. 36.

a result of physical decay.”²³ The fact that she suffers from vascular dementia, which will incrementally erase her memories of both real and imagined events, making her oblivious of the past, may, however, not be regarded as atonement but rather blissful ignorance. As Bradley asserts, “the dangerously seductive power of story lies in its ability to fabricate” by dint of melodramatic and plot-driven imagination “rather than merely reflect the lives of others.”²⁴ Consequently, Briony would only be able to retrieve her family’s wartime experiences based on her fictionalised book. She strives to assuage guilt that has been haunting her since the pre-war incident at the mansion; however, as D’Angelo states, “fiction cannot absolve or undo transgressions that have taken place in the real world.”²⁵ There will always be two incompatible realms of fiction and reality. Consequently, it is not possible to atone for misdeeds committed in the real world by means of redressing injustice in the imagined one.

Apart from the fact that the novel itself is presented as an embedded text of Briony’s authorship, it comprises other embedded pieces of writing allegedly composed by the characters but included in Briony’s work of fiction. Correspondingly, her presence in the novel as both a character and a writer of a counterfactual narrative results in double-tiered fictionality. Although intimate letters between Robbie and Cecilia as well as publisher’s and Elizabeth Bowen’s reviews of Briony’s story *Two Figures by a Fountain* are designed as given characters’ independent pieces of writing, it should be underlined that they constitute part of Briony’s novel. McEwan’s protagonists both shape and are shaped by narratives. As Finney states, “[l]iterature has [...] entered deeply into the fabric of Robbie’s and Cecilia’s lives.”²⁶ Despite the fact that Briony claims to be a messenger of Robbie’s mistakenly passed note, the idea of delivering a highly confidential letter is actually the reviewers’ suggestion, which is in turn known through the prism of her account of the past. Furthermore, she would not be able to gain access to later wartime correspondence between lovers. Thus, those embedded texts which are allegedly composed by various characters appear in fact to be fabricated by Briony.

Although *Atonement* seems to offer various perspectives, narrative turns out to be deceptive since other characters’ viewpoints are invented by Briony. As Finney states, she attempts to “project herself into the feelings and thoughts of these others, to grant them an authentic existence outside her own life’s

²³ Ibidem, p 46.

²⁴ A. Bradley, op. cit., p 26.

²⁵ K. D’Angelo, *To Make a Novel: The Construction of a Critical Readership in Ian McEwan’s Atonement*, “Studies in the Novel” 2009, No. 1 (41), p. 88.

²⁶ B. Finney, *Briony’s Stand against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan’s Atonement*, “Journal of Modern Literature” 2004, No. 3 (27), p. 78.

experiences.”²⁷ The point of view is deliberately transferred from one character to another as well as from a childish Briony to her wiser counterpart: “She left the café, and as she walked along the Common she felt the distance widen between her and another self, no less real, who was walking back toward the hospital. Perhaps the Briony who was walking in the direction of Balham was the imagined or ghostly persona.”²⁸ It is emphasised that the account of events has been rewritten throughout her life so as to achieve the vantage points of the protagonists in relation to different stages of her own life. More specifically, Briony includes her infantile self’s misinterpretation but juxtaposes it with other characters’ innermost feelings and private thoughts which she is able to comprehend owing to the passage of time and her more mature perspective. Petra Rau is of the opinion that it is “pure fantasy that undoes the arbitrariness of violent death at Dunkirk and in a bombing raid,” which results in Briony’s final draft containing a happy ending intended to be a “fictional compensation for” the nightmare of war and “indigestible reality.”²⁹ The final version of Briony’s novel is an extensively revised course of events created from the standpoint of an elderly woman, that is an experienced Briony who relives the past and attempts to redress her wrongs by means of literature.

The protagonist claims to embark on writing a book to make an attempt at seeing the world through someone else’s eyes. Although Briony strives to present events from different viewpoints, the content of the novel is a product of her fertile imagination. D’Angelo draws attention to the fact that she tends to view the world as “an extension of her literary imagination.”³⁰ Thus, perceiving events from different viewpoints proves to be pretended. Briony envisages Robbie’s dreams, hopes and struggles as well as his war experiences. It is alluded to that she has conducted research at the Imperial War Museum in London. She has also seen wounded and traumatised soldiers while working as a nurse. However, Briony rewrites the lovers’ story through the prism of her erroneous assumptions and overheated imagination. Thus, *Atonement* presents what the misreading of intentions and behaviour may lead to: “She was really an important writer in disguise. And at a time when she was cut off from everything she knew—family, home, friends—writing was the thread of continuity.”³¹ The fact that Briony offers an alternative version of the past results in profound insight into the role of writing fiction and, especially, fictional novels

²⁷ B. Finney, op. cit., p. 81.

²⁸ I. McEwan, op. cit., p. 186.

²⁹ P. Rau, *The War in Contemporary Fiction, The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*, ed. Marina MacKay. Cambridge–New York–Melbourne 2009, p. 215.

³⁰ K. D’Angelo, op. cit., p. 92.

³¹ I. McEwan, op. cit., p. 157.

portraying historical events like World War Two. In Schiff's opinion, *Atonement* is an example of "engaging and carefully orchestrated examination of reading and writing," whose core is a discourse on "how and why fiction is constructed."³² Thus, exercising her counterfactual imagination, the heroine substantially influences the content of the novel by undermining the credibility of the plot.

In Marsh's opinion, Briony's being a character-author undermines the plot's credibility to such an extent that it is possible that Robbie might be the real culprit.³³ During the dinner before the rape, Marshall claims that the twins are responsible for Lola's bruises and a scratch on her cheek. Has he already attempted to assault her? When Briony sees Lola being raped, she perceives the perpetrator as "its size and manner of moving were familiar to her."³⁴ Marsh interprets this passage as an evidence of Robbie's guilt. It is intensified with the statement "her eyes confirmed the sum of all she knew and had recently experienced."³⁵ The fact that she was familiar with the attacker's physicality, as Marsh points out, suggest that Briony knows the rapist quite well.³⁶ However, to my mind, the familiarity of movements is associated with the couple making love in the library. Briony merely draws connection between the movement relating to copulation with what she has seen earlier that day. As a result, she erroneously imagines who the culprit might be.

Atonement prompts reflections upon the fictionality of writing and the correlation between historical events and their fictionalised counterparts. As Bradley contends, the heroine remains a thought-provoking study of the "writer-as-narcissist," but a more significant question McEwan raises concerns the novelistic "moral imagination:" Does the novel really enable readers to experience the lives of others as they are lived, or is it a way of turning them into little "narrative machines" with no independent existence?³⁷ The fact that Briony recreates and rewrites history by offering Robbie and Cecilia second lives indicates that both the writer and the reader are inclined to fictionalise and reinterpret events. Thus, a historical novel might be based on historical

³² J. Schiff, *Reading and Writing on Screen: Cinematic Adaptations of McEwan's Atonement and Cunningham's The Hours*, "Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction" 2012, No. 2 (53), p. 170.

³³ H. Marsh, *Narrative Unreliability and Metarepresentation in Ian McEwan's Atonement; or, Why Robbie Might be Guilty and Why Nobody Seems to Notice*, "Textual Practice" 2018, No. 8 (32), p. 1331.

³⁴ I. McEwan, op. cit., p. 97.

³⁵ Ibidem.

³⁶ H. Marsh, op. cit., p. 1321.

³⁷ A. Bradley, op. cit., p. 27.

past but, at the same time, may remain an independent work of fiction which is not bound to reconstruct the past accurately. According to Finney, "McEwan's foregrounding of the metafictional element compels the reader to face the extent to which narration determines human life."³⁸ Briony inscribes her own narrative of others' lives on a palimpsest of a pre-existing narrative composed of history and facts: "I know there's always a certain kind of reader who will be compelled to ask, But what really happened? The answer is simple: the lovers survive and flourish. As long as there is a single copy, a solitary typescript of my final draft, then my spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love."³⁹ The heroine imagines and fictionalises the past to create a story which would be considered acceptable to readers and satisfactory to her own consciousness. Although in reality people die, they may still be alive in a counterfactual realm of fantasy if there happens to be an author who constructs new narratives for them.

Their Finest Hour and a Half

Another counterfactual approach to history is depicted in Lissa Evans's novel *Their Finest Hour and a Half*, the heroine of which is made responsible for composing a script of a propaganda war film. As Donnelly states, "[f]ilm was one of the most powerful mediums of communication and therefore propaganda during the war."⁴⁰ Correspondingly, the novel depicts an aspiring writer who is supposed to exercise her creative imagination in order to compose a desirable screenplay.

As far as the term "their finest hour" is concerned, it refers to Winston Churchill's speech delivered in June 1940 after the retreat from Dunkirk: "Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'This was their finest hour.'"⁴¹ The speech mythologised the British people as the last hope for the war-ravaged world and reinforced the conviction that they were destined to restore peace as well as rescue others. "Their finest hour" also corresponds with the title of Churchill's book published in 1949, which describes heroism of the British nation that formed the last stronghold of resistance against the German conquest.

³⁸ B. Finney, op. cit., p. 79.

³⁹ I. McEwan, op. cit., p. 211.

⁴⁰ M. Donnelly, *Britain in the Second World War*, London–New York 2005, p. 78.

⁴¹ W. Churchill, *Their Finest Hour*, [online] <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/their-finest-hour/> [accessed: 27.07.2019].

It should be borne in mind that the war not only impacted the nation as a whole, but also the structure of the male-dominated society. More precisely, it provided women with an opportunity to make a career in occupations which had been reserved for men. Catrin is a case in point since she seizes a chance to work as a screenwriter and prepare a script for propaganda purposes. Although her duties involve composing a screenplay which aims at encouraging women to perform more man-like jobs at the home front, it remains pure propaganda. To be more specific, on the one hand women were seemingly provided with more opportunities; on the other hand, they were expected to devote their effort only temporarily and, at the same time, they did not gain due respect. In her nonfiction book about women's lives during World War Two, Virginia Nicholson published a compilation of biographies of British women from different walks of life, whose everyday reality was profoundly changed by the war. To take one example, a conductress recalls that her "uniform gave off mixed messages of authority and immorality. Passengers looked askance at her sharing a friendly cigarette between runs with her driver; underlying their doubtful glances was the suspicion that she was 'up to no good.'"⁴² Likewise, Catrin's new job is also viewed as inappropriate to a certain extent and not approved of by her partner, who is an artist, since she works only with male screenwriters: Buckley and Parfitt. Apart from her profession, as an independent woman, she only pretends to have a husband; whereas in reality she has never married. In this respect, she not only creates fiction for the purpose of a film but also to maintain appearances in her personal life.

Having produced a stage play and edited a number of advertisements directed at the female audience, Catrin gets employed at a lavish television production. She is sent on a mission to interview twin sisters who allegedly helped to evacuate about fifty soldiers retreating from Dunkirk. They are believed to have sailed there in a small boat they stole from their father when he was asleep. During her conversation with Rose and Lily, it turns out that they sailed not far from the shore and returned before their adventure even began. At this juncture, her mission could end in failure; however, the heroine knows that she is expected to return to London with a convincing and compelling story: "Catrin looked at the blank page of her notepad. She had travelled for five and a half hours for this. 'Flesh out the newspaper story,' Buckley had said. 'We're looking for a bit of colour, a few scraps of authenticity to wave at the men from the ministry.'"⁴³ Not being provided with a fascinating real-life story, Catrin decides

⁴² V. Nicholson, *Millions Like Us. Women's Lives During the Second World War*, London 2012, p. 205.

⁴³ L. Evans, *Their Finest Hour and a Half*, London 2009, p. 77.

to use her imagination in order to fabricate the narrative and composes a script about two brave women who, against all the odds, managed to sail to Dunkirk and rescue a group of soldiers.

As Fowler states, “the story needs to be bigger, so veracity goes out the window.”⁴⁴ After Catrin’s stretching the truth, other screenwriters—as already mentioned she is the only female one—bend the truth even further. Purely for propaganda purposes, there is even an American soldier evacuated from Dunkirk, although Americans did not fight in Europe at that time. As Greenland states, Evans sheds light on “the techniques of commercial fiction”⁴⁵ and “the anatomy of film-making.”⁴⁶ There is also enough space on the boat for a dog, which is played by two different animals in the course of making the film. Subtle though it is, this detail contributes to the overall artificial nature of this cinematic production. Despite, or rather owing to, its imaginativeness, boldness and to some extent cheekiness, *Their Finest Hour and a Half* can be deemed, in Fowler’s words, “the truest and most enjoyable novel about home-front life.”⁴⁷ People who did not fight on the front in Europe or Africa, mostly women but also men, tended to create a fictional representation of the war; nonetheless, they also exercised their imagination in order to summon courage and boost their hopes of winning.

One of the characters who is aware of counterfactuals is a real soldier present on location. Arthur experienced the evacuation from Dunkirk himself and afterwards was employed as an expert to supervise the making of the film about this historical event and brave Sterling sisters. Being shy by nature, Arthur manages to offer only one remark:

‘Dirtier, and also [...]’ He fished for an adequate phrase, thinking of the scarecrow army that had arrived at Dover, undershirts used as bandages, jackets as pillows and stretchers, trousers striped with salty tide-marks from successive queueing in the surf.

‘[...] more weathered.’

‘Weathered,’ repeated Hadley, appreciatively. ‘That’s an excellent note, I shall pass it on straight away. I gather the director’s keen on a real-life sort of look. Anything else?’

⁴⁴ Ch. Fowler, *Their Finest Hour and a Half* by Lissa Evans, “Independent” 2009, [online] <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/their-finest-hour-and-a-half-by-lissa-evans-5451186.html> [accessed: 22.07.2019].

⁴⁵ C. Greenland, *In the Spotlight*, “The Guardian” 2009, [online] <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/mar/21/their-finest-hour-lissa-evans> [accessed: 10.06.2019].

⁴⁶ Ch. Fowler, op. cit.

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

'Yes,' said Arthur, warming to his role. 'Your uniform fits much too well. Most of them are too long in the arm—like mine, d'you see?—or too short in the leg, or simply far too big.'⁴⁸

Despite employing Arthur as a specialist and putting the onus of rendering the story as faithfully as possible on him, the director and the crew disregard his comments. He is needed only to sustain the pretence of authenticity and truth. Interestingly, his involvement in filmmaking and the message conveyed by this production boost his self-esteem as well as conviction that he is a genuine war hero. As a result, this painfully shy character summons courage to propose to one of the crew members, which may serve as an example of influence exerted by cinematography on real life; in other words, by a counterfactual vision of events on mundane reality.

This slightly feminist film is well-received by the public and it exerts a tremendous impact not only on Arthur but also on the real-life counterparts of the heroines invented by Catrin, who learns from their neighbour: "'[They] joined the ATS.'⁴⁹ After the picture came out. Rose went along to the office in Southend and told them that if she could mend a boat engine, she could certainly learn how to mend an army lorry, and so could her sister, and they got signed up straight away.'⁵⁰ As a result of watching the film based on their alleged heroism, the sisters emancipate themselves from their abusive father who is addicted to alcohol and join a paramilitary organisation. They believe that if their cinematic counterparts are able to demonstrate mechanical skills and contribute to the war effort, so are they.

Although the film carrying the title *Forbidden Voyage* is advertised as a real-life story, neither Rose and Lily's involvement nor the harsh realities of the evacuation reconstruct historical facts accurately. The screenwriters portrayed in the novel manipulate the disturbing facts of the war by adopting a counter-factual approach in order to attract viewers' interest and spread political propaganda, both in the United Kingdom and in the United States. Catrin mainly contributes to propaganda directed at the female audience by mooted her ideas concerning the heroines' courage and technical abilities. What is most unexpected and ironic is Buckley's death under film decorations and props. In the face of the raging war, dying in a studio seems to symbolise the weight of the counterfactuals utilised while making the *Forbidden Voyage* which eventually collapse on its creator.

⁴⁸ L. Evans, op. cit., p. 151.

⁴⁹ ATS means Auxiliary Territorial Service; V. Nicholson, op. cit., p. 30.

⁵⁰ L. Evans, op. cit., p. 290.

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas

John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* depicts a child's lively but, at the same time, perilous imagination. The protagonist imagines a different version of the world around him since he is unable to either comprehend or confront the grim reality. Although imagination can help to deal with the horrors of war, it may pose a substantial risk to the imaginator's life.

As Rausing contends, "it [Holocaust] seems to be increasingly mythologised and toned down, with books such as *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*."⁵¹ The complex question as to whether myths about Holocaust should be created is beyond the scope of this article. Further to imagination, regardless of the type and gravity of a historical event, the point of counterfactuals is not to mitigate the past but rather to present it from a different angle. In the case of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* the war is depicted from a perspective of an entirely innocent child, whose father is an ardent Nazi supporter.

A nine-year-old boy moves to the vicinity of the Auschwitz concentration camp, where his father serves as a commandant. Bruno views himself as an explorer of an unknown and unpenetrated land. On the one hand, an innocent and oblivious child's vision is accurately represented; on the other hand, such an approach to World War Two downplays its gravity. His use of terms closely associated with the war could be deemed hilarious, when he both mishears and mispronounces such words as "Auschwitz" and "Führer," rendering them as "out-with" and "fury" respectively. Of course, his mistakes might be accidental at first but then they seem to be repeated deliberately, as if he did not want to acknowledge true terms used by other people and still preferred his imagined versions: "'It's not an Out-With, Bruno,' said Gretel with a sigh. 'It's just Out-With.' 'Well, what's Out-With then?' he repeated. 'Out with what?'. 'That's the name of the house,' explained Gretel. 'Out-With.'"⁵² The representation of a nine-year old son of a Nazi adherent is criticised by Matthews: "Bruno's naivete stretches the bounds of belief."⁵³ On the one hand, Matthews is right since the boy must have been educated in accordance with Nazi ideology, his sister is a perfect example of a member of the Jungmädelbund,⁵⁴ he is con-

⁵¹ S. Rausing, *Publishing for Social Change*, "Development in Practice" 2011, No. 1 (21), p. 119, [online] <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23048389> [accessed: 22.07.2019].

⁵² J. Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, Oxford 2006, p. 27.

⁵³ A. T. Matthews, *Fantastic Narrative Strategies* [in:] *Navigating the Kingdom of Night*, Adelaide 2103, p. 79, [online] <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.20851/j.ctt1sq5wms.7> [accessed: 22.07.2019].

⁵⁴ trans. the Young Girls' League.

stantly surrounded by Nazi soldiers and served by selected prisoners of the concentration camp. On the other hand, his parents try to protect him from the ongoing war, which results in his indulging in escapist fantasy.

Contrary to any actual facts, one day Adolf Hitler and Eva Braun pay the family a visit. Bruno is only briefly introduced and made familiar with neither the political role of the guests nor the character of his father's duties. As Rodwell states, "[k]ey figures in history are often featured in counterfactual scenarios."⁵⁵ The act of imagining events that take place in the past is bound to be based on historical facts at least to some extent. By portraying real figures alongside fictitious characters, actual history is starkly juxtaposed with fictional representations. Consequently, the protagonist's unawareness of the situation is even more poignant and ominous.

In Matthews's view, "Boyne has reconfigured Auschwitz [...] and positioned us with the innocent in order to tell a tale with a simplistic moral. However, the fable only works if the reader has the knowledge to fill certain gaps. It requires prior knowledge of the Holocaust."⁵⁶ Possessing factual knowledge of World War Two, one may deduce that the plot can only be imaginative and counterfactual since, if it were historically accurate, there would not be any story about Bruno and Shmuel. To be more specific, it would not be possible for them to approach an electrified and manned wire fence to talk to each other. In a non-counterfactual reality, they would never establish a friendship and their dissimilar lives would never collide. It is the collision of these two worlds—a sober and realistic with an idealistic and imaginative one—that metaphorically reveals the incredibility and incomprehensibility of people's comportment during the war.

Due to his naivety, ignorance or inability to comprehend the truth, Bruno envisages that those people wearing striped pyjamas are farmers and a peculiar tribe that inhabits this new place where his family has moved in. As Rodwell claims, the novel is also worth examining from the point of view of "historical agency."⁵⁷ Although Bruno has been brought up in the Nazi era and his father holds an important military rank and is in charge of the Auschwitz concentration camp, the boy seems not to be an enthusiast of Nazism but, despite his young age, an independent and open-minded person. For example, when he

⁵⁵ G. Rodwell, *Counterfactual Histories and the Nature of History*, [in:] *Whose History?*, 2013, p. 84, [online] <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.20851/j.ctt1t304sf.17> [accessed: 1.06.2019].

⁵⁶ A. T. Matthews, op. cit., p. 83.

⁵⁷ G. Rodwell, *Unpacking Historical Novels for Their Historicity: Historical Facts and Historical Agency*, [in:] *Whose History?*, op. cit., p. 175, [online] <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.20851/j.ctt1t304sf.17> [accessed: 1.06.2019].

tries to find out more about the mysterious people working in the camp, his father retorts that "they're not people at all."⁵⁸ In spite of his father's attitude towards Jews, Bruno treats them as equal human beings and is interested in getting to know them. He lets a Jewish servant bandage his hurt knee and shares food with Shmuel. Although he wonders why a doctor works in a kitchen or why Shmuel cannot leave the camp and play on his side of the fence; he does not attempt to explore these illogical issues further.

Secretly, Bruno sneaks near the concentration camp and befriends a boy who is at the same age and even born on the same day. Both the former occurrence and the latter coincidence seem to be rather fantastic. Even such minute details are in line with a fictional representation of possible events at the time of World War Two. It should be noted that this representation is however not fantastic and another protagonist is represented in a more faithful manner. Ignorantly, Bruno disregards obvious clues such as Shmuel's thinness, tattered clothes and fear, whereas clinging to his own imagination while perceiving the circumstances. He keeps asking ridiculous questions which Shmuel, who seems to be much older emotionally despite their being of the same age, leaves unanswered: "'But don't you ever wake up in the morning and feel like wearing something different? There must be something else in your wardrobe.' Shmuel blinked and opened his mouth to say something but then thought better of it."⁵⁹ Bruno describes Shmuel as his imaginary friend in order to conceal their secret and forbidden friendship from his sister. Despite his continuous naivety, the boy realises that he had better not talk about his visits to the camp.

Eventually, Bruno sneaks into the camp through a hole dug under the fence so as to help Shmuel find his missing father. Coincidentally, all children are brought to the crematorium on that day. In Matthews's view, "historical veracity" is sacrificed "for the sake of a dramatic denouement", whereas "historical inaccuracies [...] raise many concerns about the ethics of dealing with the holocaust in fiction."⁶⁰ The ending of the novel is a perfect example of counterfactual imagining since it is at odds with any historical records and is utterly impossible. However, by dint of its dramatic climax, the novel offers a sense of justice and punishment for Bruno's father's crimes since commandant's son is killed in the same way as he ordered to kill thousands of others. As Matthews points out, Boyne's novel is designed as a fable with a moral at the end.⁶¹ The outcome of the moral is directed at Bruno's relatives and compatriots by warning them not to let it happen again.

⁵⁸ J. Boyne, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 102.

⁶⁰ A. T. Matthews, *op. cit.*, p.78.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 81–82.

Conclusion

The conclusion to be drawn from the above analyses of the selected contemporary British historical novels depicting the Second World War is that they consist in utilising counterfactual imagination. They are concerned with neither presenting the past as it was nor distorting it completely. Thus, counterfactual imagination is used by authors to reflect people's desperate desire to alter the events; yet, at the same time, their novels are not deprived of traces of historicity. The aim of imagining seems to be to emphasise unrealistic versions of the past in the face of historic events, such as World War Two. Novelists tackle the issue of reconstructing the past by imagining alternative scenarios, be it so as to give the dead a second life and atone for misdeeds (*Atonement*), alter historical events and bring them to the screen in the form of a propaganda film (*Their Finest Hour and a Half*) or depict a fictitious encounter and somehow punish perpetrators (*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*).

It is McEwan's *Atonement* that seems to be the precursor of counterfactual narratives concerned with World War Two, which may be supported by the fact that more recent novels draw on similar tropes while tackling the reality of the war. Both *Atonement* and *Their Finest Hour and a Half* portray women who exercise their imagination in order to compose compelling narratives and adjust historical events to an audience's expectations, through the medium of a book and a film respectively. The myth of Dunkirk is presented in both novels and debunked when it is revealed that, as opposed to the content of Briony's novel, Robbie was not evacuated and died in 1940; whereas, contrary to Catrin's script, the Sterling sisters did not sail to Dunkirk so as to rescue soldiers. What *Atonement* and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* have in common is children's overheated imagination and their inclination to misinterpretation leading to tragedies which affect both the creators of counterfactuals as well as their relatives and friends. Such tragedies may prompt characters who survived to recreate and alter harrowing experiences by exercising their imagination. Furthermore, readers of historical fiction can feel inclined to imagine alternative endings to heart-rending stories.

Since people are by nature prone to wonder "if only" and ask: "What if?," it may be assumed that counterfactual imagination will perform an important role in creating fiction. Counterfactuals can make compelling reading; however, the question remains to what extent they should be used in relation to historical events. Of course, it could be debatable whether such a significant and poignant event as World War Two may be reconstructed by virtue of imagination and fictitious scenarios. However, it should be pointed out that the time span between the Second World War and the twenty-first century not only

allows but also encourages to produce historical fiction based on that period. As a result, novels that consist in counterfactual imagination while depicting past events may be expected to flourish in the foreseeable future.

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